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THE KATABASIS TROPE AND A DESCENT INTO FUTURE IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S *THE HANDMAID'S TALE*

Katabasis represents a narrative trope which refers to the hero's journey into the underworld, a descent into the realm of the dead, and whose presence can be found across the world, from ancient mythologies to contemporary literature. The aim of this paper is to point to the possibility of reading Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as a katabatic narrative, more precisely as a variation of the archetypal hero's journey into the underworld, where, instead of the land of the past, the descent is directed towards a dystopian future and where, instead of a mythical superhero, the protagonist is a modern-day heroine. Having already tackled the subject of Western capitalism governed by patriarchal power relations, its obsession with controlling nature, especially the process of reproduction, and the ensuing feminist descent from it, in *The Handmaid's Tale* Atwood adjusts and adapts the dynamic topos of the katabasis so as to suit the contemporary reality and modern traumas. She presents a female narrator, a superheroine, trapped within the boundaries of a claustrophobic world, where women live subjugated and segregated by the oppressive male regime. Following the generic features of the term katabasis, the paper analyses the katabatic experience of Offred in the Republic of Gilead, a topos of Hell in not such a distant future, where the past has been erased and the citizens, especially the female ones, have been denied any right to identity and individuality. As there are numerous instances of carnivalesque elements, it is possible to approach the community of Gilead from the perspective of the carnivalization of the katabasis, both in the way it was defined by Mikhail Bakhtin and in a modern rendition explained by Linda Hutcheon, i.e. both a positive and an ironizing version of the concept.

Key words: katabasis; katabatic trope; descent narrative; female identity; carnivalization

1. INTRODUCTION

Combining two ancient Greek words *banein*, which means to go, and *kata*, which means down, the word *katabasis* refers to the hero's journey into the underworld, a descent into the realm of the dead. Katabasis represents a narrative trope, whose presence can be found across the world, from ancient mythologies to contemporary literature. Downward journeys and encounters with the dead were deployed even before the Graeco-Roman myths and epics, in the Mesopotamian cultural tradition and its epic of Gilgamesh (Scherer 2021: 13). However, it is in the period of antiquity that the descent narrative was quite prevalent: in Homer's *Oddyssey*, Odysseus visits the land of the dead; in *Republic*, Plato's description of the philosopher's journey into the cave resembles the hero's descent into Hades; in Virgil's *Aeneid*, Aeneas enters the Underworld; Ovid's *Metamorphoses* offers examples of katabasis as well. Orpheus's descent into Hell represents the most conspicuous katabatic example, though. The omnipresence and endurance of the katabasis trope are unquestionable. Journeys to the underworld, which symbolise a quest for knowledge, wisdom, truth and, very often, a quest for memories, have remained popular through the history of literary writing and are equally present in the contemporary narrative. Works like Dante's famous epic poem *Divine Comedy*, more precisely its first part *Inferno*, John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Adrienne Rich's *Diving into the Wreck*, Kazuo Ishiguro's memorious novels, Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, are only some of the famous katabasis narratives, many of which engage not only with Graeco-Roman sources of katabasis, but with each other as well (17). Numerous transformations and variations of the katabasis trope point to its never diminishing popularity and relevance. Whether adapted or refigured, the journey is considered to be part of a universal adventure (Campbell 1993), an indispensable constituent of Western civilisation, more important than the notion of Hell (Falconer 2007).

Some of the images and motifs that appear in any Western katabatic narrative, according to Falconer, are: a person lost in a wood, labyrinth or ocean, a guide from the otherworld sent to recover the person lost, a series of initiatory rites, the discovery of a talisman, a threshold crossing, a river crossing, regions of Hell/Hades subdivided into circles or compartments, a series of graded punishments increasing in severity as the traveller descends lower, distortions of time, distortions of space, a graded series of tests that the traveller must overcome culminating in an encounter with the demonic Other and/or the beloved Other (43). The aim of this paper is to point to the

possibility of reading Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* as a katabatic narrative, more precisely as a variation of the archetypal hero's journey into the underworld, where, instead of the land of the past, the descent is directed towards a dystopian future and where, instead of a mythical superhero, the protagonist is a modern-day heroine. Following the generic features of the term katabasis, the paper analyses the katabatic experience of Offred in the Republic of Gilead, a topos of Hell in not such a distant future, where the past has been erased and the citizens, especially the female ones, have been denied any right to identity and individuality.

2. KATABASIS, ANTIQUE AND MODERN HEROES

In the Graeco-Roman world, a katabasis narrative tells of a hero descending to the underworld, where the encounter with the dead enables him to recover memories, to find what or who he is looking for, and be metaphorically reborn. The katabatic experience is summoned by the hero's passive state, characterised by his inability to act and respond to the problems of the world. Such an idle predicament requires a tutelary figure that would guide the hero through the unknown of the underworld until he is ready to be reborn, i.e. leave the realm of the dead and take active participation in the real world. Caeners (2015) notices that in the classical epic tradition a typical journey into the afterlife is taken when the hero finds himself in a hopeless situation with no other choice but to visit the underworld in search for counsel and guidance, or for some knowledge restricted to the dead. According to this author, there are three main elements that define the katabasis trope: 1) the descent takes place at the moment of crisis in the hero's life; 2) the hero is looking for something of vital importance, be it an object or a piece of information; 3) the hero is accompanied by a guide or protector, who takes him to the destination or, as someone who possesses prophetic knowledge, stands for the destination (2). Upon the return to the upper world, the hero's position changes from his passive dependence into an active approach to the crisis so that, after some time of being apparently lost or dead, the hero is reborn. Interestingly, sometimes instead of a revelatory experience that leads to the transcendence of the historical, material world, i.e. conversion, there may be a radical shift of perspective that leads further down, i.e. inversion (Falconer 2007). Needless to say, the only person that was eligible to undergo a transformative journey and experience a revelation and a metamorphosis in antiquity was a male hero. Not surprisingly at all, there were no female heroes descending as women were considered the very embodiment of the underworld.

Gradually, the literal death has been replaced by allegories, where the underworld is actually a symbol for life on earth and Hell a predominant feeling of modern time, the setting that the protagonist longs to escape. As Falconer explains, instead of traditional crossing from historical to eternal realms, modern katabasis narratives depict heroes "peering through cracks, ripping back curtains, opening trapdoors to find infernal worlds contingent and coterminous with their own" (22), as if there was nowhere to descend. Hell is neither more abstract, nor less real. It is a state of mind. Both narratives and research now focus on inward journeys, i.e. journeys into the unconscious, where protagonists are supposed to face their demons. Such a descent is not a punishment, but rather indicates metaphorical alienation and fragmentation and, predictably, a quest for self leads not only to self-discovery but to the uncovering of human injustice, as well. Thus, the katabasis represents an archetypical locus where the revision of modern-day superheroes is facilitated and enacted (Caeners 2015) and where, instead of unity sought by classical heroes, the contemporary human realm with all its traumas allows only for fragmentation. Not surprisingly, with a different descent, a different rebirth, *anabasis*, is expected. What can be often found in contemporary women's writing is that women use the katabatic narrative to express the uneasy relationship between female subjectivity and patriarchal culture: sometimes the underworldly, feminine position is used to critique different aspects of Western capitalism, especially its embrace of patriarchal ideologies, and sometimes it simply shows awareness of a paradoxical relation to Western capitalism (Falconer 2007). Having already tackled the subject of patriarchal power relations governing Western capitalism, its fantasy to control nature, especially the process of reproduction, and the ensuing feminist descent from it (*Surfacing*), in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood presents a female narrator, a superheroine, trapped within the boundaries of a claustrophobic world where "power and control over reproductive rights are central issue" (Deer 1994: 131) and where women live subjugated and segregated by the oppressive male regime. Atwood adjusts and adapts the dynamic topos of the katabasis so as to suit the contemporary reality and modern traumas. This alternative world to which Offred is dragged is almost tangible, within grasp, already unfolding in earnest and, bordering on reality, this world, as Atwood insists, pertains not to science fiction, but rather speculative fiction.[1.] It is Offred's voice that speaks out from the abyss,

1. For more on this discussion, initiated by U. Le Guin's reviews of Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood,* published in The Guardian (2009), where she argues that the two novels, as well as *The Handmaid's Tale,* belong to science fiction, see Lešić (2022). Lešić aligns with Le Guin and proceeds to interpret the novel about Gilead as a science fiction piece, more precisely, a gothic novel.

acquainting the reader with a whole new ideology and social authority. The desire for liberation it compels, as well as Offred's almost forlorn hope of self-preservation and repossession of identity, seem to be haunted by the inscription on the entrance to Dante's underworld which encourages (or warns) the newcomers to abandon all hope and all cowardice and arm themselves with endurance and strength of spirit as they are about to encounter and experience the darkest facets of humanity. Indeed, Offred, being more than an ordinary human, moving in a world with altered laws of nature, seems to be a descendant of a hero that, as described by Frye (2000), defines a romance, which Luketa (2018) uses as a starting point in her analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale*, trying to prove that Atwood's novel, which abounds in motifs and techniques employed primarily by the gothic novel and romance, is actually their relative and derivative. Luketa highlights a lack of understanding found in the critical literature regarding the interconnection of various genre determinations, which led to rigid categorizations of the novel as science fiction, dystopia, futuristic novel, satire, to mention just a few (64-65) and suggests that, by employing conventions of the gothic novel, Atwood constructs a subversive critique of the patriarchal social order and presents a compelling version of the future (66), and thus invites to a reconsideration of one's ties under the patriarchy (76).

3. A DESCENT IN(TO) GILEAD

The Handmaid's Tale begins with the narrator whose descent has already happened. After having been abducted and taken to Gilead, Offred's initiation process takes place in the gymnasium, a liminal space between the old and new life, where she and other women, who had proved to be fertile before and outside of Gilead, are held captive and educated until they are ready to be sent to Commanders and assigned their new names. The Republic of Gilead is a totalitarian patriarchal theocracy, ruled by the Committee, and, on a regional level, by Councils. It borders Canada to the north and Mexico to the south, so it is not some generic subterranean space, but rather an underworld with concrete geographical features in the middle of America. In other words, neither in terms of distance nor in terms of time is Gilead a faraway place. After the rise of Gilead, all former citizens of the US have been assigned to a particular class and are expected or forced to fulfill their roles. A greater part of the legislation is based on a rigid interpretation of Scripture. It is only men that have access to higher education, titles and career, whereas women are supposed to submit to the authority of men, they are not allowed to read or write (except Aunts), participate in

the government, or hold any property. The only purpose of women is to bear children, and, consequently, only those women who have already proved fertile are abducted. Upon arrival in Gilead, they are supervised and instructed by Aunts, who represent tutelary figures as their role is to guide handmaids through the system of Gilead by teaching them how to behave. Although an inverted world, in the words of Aunts it is a privilege to be there, not a prison (Atwood 2016: 11). In other words, handmaids should be thankful for being chosen by a certain household as breeders instead of being sent to Colonies to clean up radioactive waste.

The reader learns throughout the novel that, in accordance with the katabatic topos, the heroine used to be quite passive, unlike her mother and best friend Moira, who fought for women's rights, protesting and warning about women's position in society. It was Moira who had been apprehensive, alert to the gradual foreboding changes that were preparing the country for an oppressive regime, whereas most people, including Offred, "lived, as usual, by ignoring" (89). At the very moment of crisis, while planning their escape, Luke, the heroine's husband and her daughter's father, was the one who was active all the time, while Offred depicts herself predominantly waiting, sitting, smoking: "white, flat, thin […], transparent" (133), "running: away, away" (346). They did not manage to cross the border, though, and, together with her daughter, she was carried unconscious to Gilead, where she begins to tell her story as the one and only chronicle of the Republic of Gilead. By means of the experiences she narrates, Offred allows the world to see itself in a near future, to see where it is headed. Her intention is, actually, to preserve not only the remnants of her past, but also hope that she will eventually be able to revive the old life. And the only hope lies in the fact that she is telling a story, the one she apologizes for being as it is: not civilized, not happy, with so much pain (409), but also the one which presupposes there is a listener or reader, someone in the future who will understand the longing that is encoded in her words: "I tell, therefore you are" (410). Thus, telling a story or writing it represents a hopeful act. Offred's story is, like everything else, told in fragments. As if she knew that it would be impossible to tell it later, she reminds herself of who she is and whom she used to be, and, in that way, defies the system by yelling in its face *nolite te bastardes carborundorum*. Emphasizing the importance of a novelist's writing activity, which could be compared to Offred's tremendous narrative skills, and which could be conceived as "an act of hope" or "a gesture toward psychological survival", Howells paraphrases Carol Shields' words: "fiction is a response to the real, often 'untenable' world in which the writer finds herself, but it is also an act of transformation where telling stories reinterprets the world from different angles,

reclaiming secrets from the past or hidden within personal histories" (Howells 2003: 199). Moreover, it represents an act of power since the control over the ending is in the author's hands (Atwood 2016: 63), or, at least, should be. Offred is compelled to tell her story in the same way and for the same reason a novelist is propelled to write – as an act of hope it can secure psychological survival.

Atwood's portrayal of her entrapped heroine as alternating between her old and new identity, struggling to remember who she was while performing her new role, represents another typical characteristic of the katabasis. This kind of estrangement and split identity, which is not an unprecedented theme in Atwood's fiction, is further highlighted by two names the heroine has – her real name remains unknown and her new name Offred, two countries – the US and Gilead, two households – the one with Luke and their daughter and the other with the Commander, Fred, his wife and two Marthas. Similarly to *Lady Oracle*, *Cat's Eye*, *The Robber Bride*, *Alias Grace*, the heroine's double identity in *The Handmaid's Tale* allows the dark twin of the conscious self, which is shadowed or displaced, to come closer to figuring out what is unspeakable and to speak in a disruptive voice (Howells 2003). Sedgwick (1986) explains that the doubles, the position which arises when the self is blocked off from something to which it ought normally to have access (in this case, from its own past and the old life), have to continue their lives separately. Even though they stay connected, the relationship between them is one of the parallels. That is what usually happens in post-1945 narratives, where, as Falconer explains, "the function of the descent journey can no longer be to overcome and subjugate the dark realm", but rather "to acquire the ability to live with the double-vision or to stand astride the two realities" (Falconer 2007: 4-5). Not forfeiting her old identity easily, Offred will carry the burden of the new one, that of a handmaid. The patronymic names the handmaids are given represent the first token of them having to renounce who they used to be and accept that now they are the possessions of their Commanders. Even more, the fact that they are moved to a new posting and given a new name after three failed attempts at bearing children implies that they have no control over who they are and, just like their names, can easily be substituted. The maternalistic names of Aunts, which imply love and care, however, do not encourage any trustful relationship between women, but rather rank them in terms of authority. Even the colours of the prescribed uniforms, allocated to different sections of society so as to denote a woman's role in the community, reinforce social status. The overpowering red colour, which is reserved for the handmaids (red skirts, gloves and shoes), stands not only for passion and fertility, but for sacrifice and blood as well. Only the wings around the hand-

maids' faces are white, but, ironically, instead of giving freedom, they are meant to restrict the handmaids' view, i.e. their access to the surrounding world.

Besides the major heroine's descent – into Gilead, there are numerous instances of literal and metaphorical descent within Fred's household and outside it. Offred's room is upstairs, so every time she is summoned or expected, she has to descend in her fairytale, carnivalesque costume, first go along the hall and then down the stairs:

> "I go out into the polished hallway, which has a runner down the centre, dusty pink. Like a path through the forest, like a carpet for royalty, it shows me the way.
> The carpet bends and goes down the front staircase and I go with it, one hand on the banister […].
> There remains a mirror, on the hall wall. If I turn my head so that the white wings framing my face direct my vision towards it, I can see it as I go down the stairs, round, convex, a pier-glass, like the eye of a fish, and myself in it like a distorted shadow, a parody of something, some fairytale figure in a red cloak, descending towards a moment of carelessness that is the same as danger. A Sister, dipped in blood." (Atwood 2016: 11-12)

Each of the repeating "Night" chapters in the novel allows a cyclical descent into a new nightmare, where Offred is struggling to preserve the most cherished moments and memories of her former life. The worst dream she has, which is actually her memory of her and her daughter trying to escape, their fall before they managed to reach the water and their separation, is described in the "Nap" chapter.

The most atypical and unexpected descent, however, represents the Commander's taking Offred out, to an unknown place of deforming mirrors, a journey she has to embark on disguised in his wife's light blue winter cloak with a hood so as to safely reach a secret brothel arranged by high officers of Gilead. Dressed in a girdle-like costume of purple sequins and feathers, glittering and theatrical, "an old theatre costume, or something from a vanished nightclub act" (356), which had been procured by the Commander himself, in "absurdly high heels" and with painted face (357--358), Offred enters what once used to be a hotel, instructed to say, if anyone asks, that she is "an evening-rental" (361). Akin to Persephone's descent into the Underworld (Trivellini 2016), this specific katabasis into Jezebel's, a place that represents another instance of men's power and the subordination of women, is orchestrated by the Commander, which temporarily turns him into her guide, the one who could possibly lead her to wisdom or knowledge.

Atwood's female historian manages to gain some advantage by refusing to accept that her role of victim is inevitable. She devises risky schemes to double-cross the Commander and his wife, starts a sexual affair with Nick, becomes associated with the underground network, all these highlighting her struggle to survive. Yet, readers are left in suspense about her fate. Offred is not a typical descent narrator, the survivor of Hell or escape artist from the underworld. Were it not for "Historical Notes", *The Handmaid's Tale* would have an open end; however, professor Pieixoto closes the story, concluding that, like Eurydice, Offred cannot be brought back to speak: "We may call Eurydice forth from the world of the dead, but we cannot make her answer; and when we turn to look at her we glimpse her only for a moment, before she slips from our grasp and flees" (478-479).

4. THE CARNIVALIZATION OF THE KATABASIS

With respect to the afore-mentioned features of the descent, it is possible to analyse the community of Gilead from the perspective of the carnivalization[2] of the katabasis, as it contains the most distinguishing elements of the carnival, such as rituals, oaths, abundance, even laughter. Literary criticism recognizes two types of carnivalesque, one being linked to the founder of the concept, Mikhail Bakhtin, and the other described and defined by a modern literary scholar, Linda Hutcheon. For Bakhtin, the carnival and carnivalesque represent an entirely positive phenomenon, whereas Hutcheon insists that, besides having a positive impact of potential change, if used with irony and criticism, carnivalesque has the power to unveil the cruelty and alienation of modern society. In a parodic and self-reflective manner, modern cultural forms tend to criticize the selfishness and consumerism of the modern way of life, as well as to envisage a future society based on male power, with women being re-marginalized and re-subjugated. Since modern literature abounds with pain and confusion, a demonic world, inverted but full of folly, Hutcheon (1983) believes that contemporary novelists have actually restored the negative pole of Bakhtin's ambivalence (88), almost completely eradicating the positive effects of the carnival, such as inexhaustible energy and irrepressible freedom, so as to credibly depict the modern condition's overall sterility.

In that sense, except for leading to birth and renewal, the concept of the Ceremony seems to be devoid of the typical grotesque elements as it is neither an act of love-making nor copulation, but rather represents serene, passive acceptance on the maid's

2. On carnivalization and the use of carnival logic of a world turned upside down, see M. Bakhtin (1984). On modern interpretation of carnivalization, see L. Hutcheon (1983).

part.[3] On the other hand, the entire scene of descent into Jezebel's resembles a carnival: starting from the disguising costumes women are wearing, their make-up, the reason why Offred accepts to go there despite the risk involved – to "break the monotony" and subvert "the perceived respectable order of things" (Atwood 2016: 357), to the general entertaining atmosphere of a masquerade party with men mingling with doll-like women with "mouths too red, too wet, blood-dipped and glistening; or on the other hand, too clownish" (364). A similar carnivalesque description is used in the grim 'Salvaging' chapter:

> "The three bodies hang there, even with the white sacks over their heads looking curiously stretched, like chickens strung up by the necks in a meatshop window; […] It's hard to take your eyes off them. Beneath the hems of the dresses the feet dangle, two pairs of red shoes, one pair of blue. If it weren't for the ropes and the sacks it could be a kind of dance, a ballet, caught by flash-camera: mid-air. They look arranged." (425)

The Republic of Gilead can boast of both original and ironized carnivalesque features. It is an inverted world, where the real world's fight for feminism has been extinguished and the male power enthroned. The citizens have to wear clothes of specific types and colour, but, contrary to the carnival's equality, these costumes are designed to match their hierarchical status. Abortions and homosexuality are suspected to have led to low birth rates and infertility, which consequently disrupted the cycle of birth and death. What could now lead to a possible birth is the Ceremony, devised according to the Scripture, and what definitely leads to an imminent death, i.e. Salvaging and the Wall displaying the bodies of executed people, is any violation of rules. Atwood's engagement with carnivalesque themes, whether those framed by Bakhtin or those modified by Hutcheon, is aimed at criticizing modern society, showing and warning that, although the current condition is far from ideal, the future that the world is heading for is even worse. Being a dystopian novel, *The Handmaid's Tale* proffers a totalitarian male regime, where power and control are the most sought-after instruments, which even those deprived of all communication and individualism, such as handmaids, long to be able to exercise: "I enjoy the power; power of a dog bone, passive but there" (Atwood 36). Striving not only for power, but for individualism and desire for the future as well, Offred is referring to the way she could move her hips as she passes by in front of the guards to attract their eye. However, the predominant power, in its absolute form, lies in the hands of the Commanders and Aunts,

3. On the grotesque, see M. Bakhtin (1984a).

who, with different forms and levels of prohibition and punishment, instill fear[4]. The fact that Gilead is not a world that has been distorted beyond recognition, but rather a logical continuation of the current state, contributes to the forewarning tone of the novel, where the aim of Offred's telling a story from the very bottom of Hades is not to amuse readers, but rather to inform them of the catastrophe that is not unrealistic. In that sense, Offred mirrors Atwood's 'role as an artist in trying to change the course of events that seem to be inevitable' (Lopičić 2007).

5. CONCLUSION

Apart from there being two clearly distinctive worlds at the very surface of the story – the one in which Offred was happy with her family and the other into which she and her daughter have descended (or, following the generic katabatic features, the upper world and the underworld), the novel exhibits many other classical katabatic features. Firstly, even in the new, dystopian underworld, it is easy to differentiate between the setting upstairs, the room assigned to Offred, where she tries to preserve her old self, and the setting downstairs to which she, in her new role, descends on request as Offred. Symbolically, there is a hall and stairs, which are a typical katabatic element, representing a liminal space that connects and/or separates the two worlds. The antithetical relations between these worlds are highlighted by the fact that only upstairs in the room Offred can consciously try to keep her new and old self separate so as to preserve at least the memory of who she used to be, while downstairs she has to succumb to her new identity devoid of any kind of freedom. Secondly, there is the aforementioned passivity of the heroine at the moment of crisis. Also, immediately upon the descent, Offred and other women are introduced to their guides, i.e. Aunts, responsible for the process of assimilation and accommodation to the new world. Furthermore, there is an alteration of the dream motif, which allows some of the most vivid realist scenes from the previous life to occur. Finally, a most conspicuous example of katabasis is Offred's descent into Jezebel's, orchestrated by the Commander, which represents the deepest level of the underworld that Offred lives in. Throughout

4. In his essay *Margaret Atwood's* The Handmaid 's Tale *and the Dystopian Tradition* (1987), Malak identifies precisely the power as described in *The Handmaid's* Tale as one of the main characteristics of dystopian novels. Another feature would be conflicts that arise from the binary oppositions, i.e. dialectical dualities, such as emotion and reason, imagination and logic, intuition and science, love and power, kindness and cruelty, tolerance and judgment, spirituality and materialism, good and evil. Furthermore, dystopian characters tend to be two-dimensional and they live in societies associated with fear of the future, which contributes to the nightmarish atmosphere of the novel. The novel also displays elements of irony and feminism, as well as of grotesque realism, typical of Bakhtin's carnival.

the novel, there are instances of Atwood using carnivalesque, both in the way it was defined by Mikhail Bakhtin and in a modern rendition explained by Linda Hutcheon, i.e. both a positive and an ironizing version of the concept, thus interweaving life, equality and universalism with infertility, alienation and death. Therefore, it could be argued that *The Handmaid's Tale* carnivalizes the katabatic trope so as to adjust it not only to contemporary society but, more importantly, to its immanent future.

On the other hand, what differs from the ritual reading of the katabasis, which includes the initiation of death and rebirth after spending some time in the underworld and after finding the wisdom, object or person of interest, is the third phase that remains undefined in *The Handmaid's Tale*. The novel does not end with the triad having been achieved. It is only in the photo that Offred manages to recover her daughter (even that only for a moment), so her own rebirth does not seem feasible either, especially after the *Historical Notes*, written ironically by two men, both scientists, where the reader is offered an explanation on the heroine's story, its origin and structure. Offred does not emerge as a hero from the katabasis. Moreover, instead of there being a moment of identity formation or certain transformation, katabasis turns into a permanent displacement with almost no chance of coming back to the old life. The track of Offred and, more importantly, her voice, has been lost, smothered by a scientific male world. This is a rather disturbing ending given that Gilead is not some subterranean world or the world of the dead only to be visited or inhabited afterlife; it is a country within the USA boundaries, that part of it that is becoming chaotic, fragmented, deprived of freedom. Gilead represents the counterpart of Hades – a modernist and realistic dystopian response to the introduction of a futuristic world. It is no longer just a folklore matrix, but rather the interior of man's subconscious. It is a realistic dystopia, the abominable future into which humanity is descending. What has been lost is the belief in return.

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KATABAZIČNI TROP I SILAZAK U BUDUĆNOST U ROMANU *SLUŠKINJINA PRIČA* MARGARET ATVUD

Sažetak

Katabasis predstavlja narativni trop koji se odnosi na putovanje junaka u podzemni svet, silazak u carstvo mrtvih, a čije se prisustvo može naći širom sveta, od drevnih mitologija do savremene književnosti. Brojne varijacije i transformacije ovog tropa ukazuju na njegovu popularnost i uvek prisutnu relevantnost. Bilo da je prilagođen ili preoblikovan, silazak se smatra delom univerzalne avanture, neizostavnom komponentom zapadne civilizacije. Postepeno je bukvalna smrt zamenjena alegorijama, gde je podzemni svet postao zapravo simbol života na zemlji, a pakao preovlađujuće osećanje modernog vremena, okruženje iz kojeg protagonista žudi da pobegne. Cilj ovog rada je da ukaže na mogućnost čitanja romana *Sluškinjina priča* Margaret Atvud kao katabatičkog narativa, tačnije kao varijacije arhetipskog putovanja junaka u donji svet, gde je, umesto u prošlost, silazak usmeren ka distopijskoj budućnosti i gde je, umesto mitskog superheroja, protagonista savremena heroina. Dotakavši se i ranije teme zapadnog kapitalizma, kojim upravljaju patrijarhalni odnosi moći, njegove opsednutosti kontrolom prirode, posebno kontrolom procesa reprodukcije, kao i feminističkog iskoraka iz istog, u romanu *Sluškinjina priča* Atvud prilagođava dinamički topos katabaze savremenoj realnosti i modernoj traumi. Ona predstavlja ženskog naratora, superheroinu, zarobljenu unutar granica klaustrofobičnog sveta, u kome žene žive potčinjene i segregirane od strane represivnog muškog režima. U skladu sa generičkim svojstvima pojma katabaze, rad analizira katabatičko iskustvo Ofred u Republici Gilead, svojevrsnom toposu pakla u ne tako dalekoj budućnosti, gde je prošlost izbrisana, a građani, posebno žene, uskraćeni svakog prava na sopstveni identitet i individualnost. S obzirom na brojne primere karnevalskih elemenata, poput rituala, zakletvi, izobilja, čak i smeha, zajednici Gilead moguće je pristupiti i iz perspektive karnevalizacije katabaze, kako na način koji je definisao Mihail Bahtin, tako i u modernom viđenju, koje je predstavila Linda Hačion, odnosno i u pozitivnoj i u ironizovanoj verziji koncepta. Stoga

bi se moglo tvrditi da *Sluškinjina priča* karnevalizuje katabatički trop kako bi ga prilagodila ne samo savremenom društvu, već, što je još značajnije, njegovoj imanentnoj budućnosti.

Ključne reči: katabaza; katabazični trop; narativ o silasku; ženski identitet; karnevalizacija

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